**3.3 How others see us**

The relative nature of poverty is an old theme in social science. Adam Smith, the eighteenth century writer who is often regarded as the founding father of economics, put it this way: ‘By necessaries I understand not only the commodities that are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest orders, to be without’ (Smith, 1776, quoted in Sen, 1981).

Ideas of what it is to be poor are thus closely tied up with difficulty in maintaining the basic decencies of life. In the Rowntree studies, people on low incomes repeatedly referred to fear, for example fear of homelessness or disconnection from water, heat and power; to shame, especially shame at getting into debt; and to guilt about having to ask others for help. ‘When they turned the water tap off, I felt very upset, I can't explain … I feel personally ashamed. I feel ashamed at myself’ (quoted in Kempson, 1996, p. 37).

As a result, the idea of being ‘poor’ carries a **stigma**: it is a label that many people living on low incomes resist. For example, in a set of interviews in the early 1990s, 85 social security claimants were asked whether they thought ‘poverty’ existed in Britain, and if so, who were the poor and were they themselves ‘poor’? Almost everyone could answer these questions, and almost two thirds of interviewees said that they did not consider themselves to be poor. Half of the rest admitted reluctance in defining themselves as poor. The answers were also gendered. Men were more likely than women to deny poverty, suggesting that men may be more likely to be ashamed and women more realistic, as this short extract from an interview shows:

**Definition**

**Stigma**

An attribute that is perceived by others as demeaning or discrediting for those who have it. It can be social or physical or a characteristic shared by a whole group or by a few individuals. Stigma is used to justify exclusion.

*Interviewer:* Do you think poverty still exists in this country?

*Respondent (man):* It don't.

*Respondent's wife:* It does!

*Respondent:* We're not poverty-stricken, nowhere near it yet. We've got all the stuff we can sell.

*Respondent's wife:* But that doesn't mean we've got food in the cupboard …

(quoted in Dean, 1992, p. 83)

The interviewees in the survey expressed many different meanings of the word poverty. Some saw poverty more as a state of mind than a fact: poor people were ‘people who think they're poor’, an idea often associated with the notion that people bring poverty upon themselves. The survey author comments that some interviewees seemed to see the admission of poverty as a kind of self-indulgence: they insisted that there were many worse off than themselves, or that ‘real’ poverty no longer existed. Others felt that poverty implied a lack of dignity or cleanliness and cited their clean homes as evidence that they were not poor. Others straightforwardly resisted what they saw as an undesirable classification: some said that they did not ‘class’ themselves as ‘poor’, but as ‘ordinary working class’.

Poverty is therefore not only a relative matter. Representations of the poor in British culture are often demeaning. As a result of these derogatory meanings, it is hard for people struggling on low incomes to identify themselves as ‘poor’ and to use that identity in campaigning at the level of national policy. National anti-poverty lobbying has been largely conducted by ‘experts’ and professional campaign groups. This is in contrast to the effective organisation and national lobbying carried out on their own behalf by, for example, people with disabilities (many of whom suffer from poverty) who have fought to change public representations of disability and to change social and individual expectations (Beresford and Croft, 1995). Campaigns of this kind require people to identify with a label; but, as a participant in one conference that brought together anti-poverty campaigners and people with experience of poverty put it: ‘I think this word poverty is a real crusher’ (Lister and Beresford, 1991, p. 10).



**Figure 4:** A homeless man begging from commuters

**Summary**

* Claims about who is *poor* are rooted in shared and contested ideas about the basic necessities of life.
* The experience of *poverty* is both *relative* and *relational*. It is defined by what people have, and what they can do, relative to the opportunities of others.
* *Poverty* carries derogatory meanings, so it does not easily provide a basis for collective identity.